



School of Liberal Arts

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Writing Effective Research Papers in the Humanities

Research papers at the undergraduate level in higher education usually take one of two forms: a paper providing coherently organized information about a specific topic, or a paper presenting and supporting a specific, often controversial, claim about the topic. You need to determine which kind of paper is required for the particular assignment you are completing. Read the assignment sheet carefully and consult with your instructor to make sure you understand the specific requirements for the paper.

Although the paper may be due toward the end of the semester, make sure you begin working on it early so that you will be able to complete the research and write multiple drafts of the paper, revising each time for greater clarity and accuracy.

Remember that you are responsible for helping to maintain the high ethical standards of academic research. Make sure you represent the views of your research sources fairly and accurately and that you acknowledge these sources conscientiously, without plagiarizing or fabricating any information.

Following are some steps that will help you plan and compose your paper:

<i>SELECT A FUNCTIONAL TOPIC</i>

- **Determine your topic and focus:** Your topic should be complex enough to be researched from a variety of sources, but sufficiently narrowed to allow you to write effectively about it in the intended length of the assignment.
- **Gather ideas and information:** If necessary, consult your assignment sheet again. What types of sources are required for this assignment? Do you need information from observations, personal experience, textbooks, lab work, interviews, library research, etc.?**
- **Talk your ideas out with someone:** Discussing your ideas can offer a sense of direction in the early drafting of the essay. Talking can help clarify tentative ideas and let you figure out what you know about the subject and what information you still need.**
- **Narrow your topic:** Make sure you have narrowed your general subject area to a specific topic. Instead of trying to write a seven-page paper on recycling, for example, you might focus on curbside recycling for residential neighborhoods.
- **Consider your sources:** A preliminary search for available sources can be a factor in deciding if you need to narrow your topic or broaden it in order to have enough materials.
- **What is your purpose/claim?:** It is important to formulate specific research questions to guide your research. What question(s) will your research paper answer? Will you be providing information to inform your audience; or will you be supporting a controversial claim, seeking to convince or persuade your audience concerning the validity of that claim?

DETERMINE YOUR PURPOSE AND APPROACH

Once you have an overview of your subject, you need to think about your specific purpose for writing. Be sure you know what you're trying to accomplish in your paper. Research papers accomplish different tasks:

- **Explain and define the topic.** The explanatory purpose is used to review and itemize factual data.
- **Analyze the specific issues.** The analytical purpose is used to classify various parts of the subject and to investigate each one in depth.
- **Persuade the reader about the validity of your claim.** Make the reader believe what you claim with the weight of your evidence. The persuasive purpose is used to defend your argument convincingly.

Usually one of these purposes will dominate the paper, but **you will probably employ all of the purposes** in one way or another. For example, the writer who argues against the recreational use of drugs must also explain the products and analyze both the types of drugs and the different dangers associated with them.

IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE

Who will be the audience for your research project?*

- **Who will be interested** in the information you gather, and **why?**
- **What do you know about their backgrounds?**
- **What will they want to know?**
- **What responses do you want to elicit from them?**
- **What assumptions and beliefs might they already hold about the topic?**
- **What kinds of evidence will you need to convince them of your view?**
- **What instructor expectations will you need to meet?**

Design your research paper for an audience of interested readers who expect a depth of understanding on your part and evidence of your background reading about and researching the particular topic you have selected. The nature and needs of your audience will guide your approach, affect your development, and influence word choice. Meet your readers' needs: tell them what they need to know without insulting their intelligence. Say something worthwhile, something new. Don't bore your readers by providing them with known facts they could find in an encyclopedia. Instead, invite your readers into the discussion by approaching the topic from an interesting and different point of view.

PLAN and BEGIN RESEARCH

- **Generate ideas** about what you already know about your topic. Start by using heuristics. Try to sketch out ideas on paper. You can try brainstorming, free writing, mapping, clustering, making jot lists, talking into an audio recorder, outlining your ideas, etc. ** Formulate specific research questions you will seek answers to during your research. Determine what you need to know to write a successful paper, and identify appropriate source material. Prepare index cards, a research journal, an annotated bibliography, an issue grid, or some other tool to help you stay organized as you begin collecting materials and gathering information.

- **Gather all your sources** and record exact bibliographic information for each source: author, title and publication information. Make sure you know which documentation format your instructor requires: MLA, APA, or other format. Xerox the articles, read them critically and take careful notes. Highlight important facts, statistics, quotations or ideas you want to include in your paper. Look for any points that seem especially important to understanding and explaining your topic. Determine which key factors appear in several articles. Evaluate your list of ideas and consider whether you have enough evidence to support these ideas. Eliminate points that seem minor, emphasize ideas which are in the mainstream of the research, and identify and combine similar ideas.
- **Consider how your ideas help to establish a thesis**, and think once again about purpose. Is your list of ideas a collection of reasons? consequences? problems? Then what kind of approach suggests itself to you? cause and effect? problem and solution? explanation of a procedure? evaluation of reasons for your position on an issue? Evaluate your articles critically. Analyze the information in each one and draw conclusions about what each author contributes to the discussion on this issue.

DRAFTING and REVISING**

- **Start with a discovery draft:** Your first draft does not need to be polished or perfect; it is just a place to start. In this draft you will recognize what you have to say and how you want to say it.
Caution: The discovery draft will need revision. Fixing commas and spelling will not hide unfocused ideas or poorly structured writing.
- **Allow yourself time away from your draft:** Once you have finished an early draft, put it away overnight or for a few days. This break will allow you to see your work more objectively. Confusing ideas, awkward sentences, lack of detail, and poor organization will be easier to notice.
- **Revise the discovery draft:** Try new strategies and keep track of what works for you. Here are some useful strategies you can try:
 - Involve readers** in the revision process. Feedback can help you think objectively about your paper. Make sure your readers understand the assignment and teacher's expectations. The more informed your readers are, the more useful their feedback will be.
 - Consult your assignment sheet.** Make sure you have drafted the kind of paper your professor has assigned. Check whether you address all parts of the assignment. Did you follow the organization and format guidelines?
 - Check balance.** Make sure that the most important parts of your work receive sufficient attention. Are you emphasizing the same sections that your assignment stresses?
 - Draft outline.** Summarize the main idea of each paragraph. What does the paper say? Do what it says and what you meant to write match? Does the paper still meet the assignment?
- Make sure you do not plagiarize or fabricate any source information.
Plagiarism occurs when you adopt or reproduce the ideas, words, or statements of another person without appropriate acknowledgement. You must give credit to the

originality of others and acknowledge your sources whenever you do any of the following:

- Quote another person's actual words, either oral or written
- Paraphrase another person's words, either oral or written
- Use another person's idea, opinion, or theory
- Borrow facts, statistics, or other illustrative material, unless the information is common knowledge

Fabrication occurs when you falsify or invent any information or data in an academic paper including, but not limited to, statistics, records, laboratory results, and citations to sources of information.

Penalties for plagiarism and fabrication can sometimes be quite severe. Also, as a student, you are responsible for maintaining the high ethical standards of academic research.

FINE TUNING**

Check your revised draft for stylistic concerns.

- **Transitions:** Are paragraphs in your draft clearly connected to each other? Embed transitions by repeating key words or ideas from the last sentence of a paragraph in the first sentence to the next. Embed transitional words within paragraphs to make sure sentences within paragraphs also connect.
- **Sentences:** Is sentence length varied? If all sentences have about the same number of words, try combining short sentences into one long sentence or putting key ideas in short sentences to give them emphasis.
- **Diction:** Look at your word choices. Do you use the same words over and over? Can some of them be replaced with synonyms? Does the draft demonstrate your ability to use the vocabulary of the course?
- **Beware of grammar and spelling checkers:** Make sure you understand the changes your computer is suggesting. Also, proofread your work to catch mistakes these programs overlook.

Revised in May 2008

**Lunsford, Andrea and Robert Connors. The Everyday Writer. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.*

***Molinder-Hogue, Teresa. Handout. "Tips from the University Writing Center." 22 March, 2000.*

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